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Metahistory and Allegorical Bestiary

Gábor Roskó's Art

Metahistory is an ironical and allegorical interpretation of history. Allegory and irony, however, have been understood by many to mean different things—some see allegory from the aspect of irony, others read them vice versa. One fact is for certain: none of these allegorical-ironical stories are so simple, as they are about otherness and particularity, as well as mystery and puzzles. According to the Greek etymology of the word, allegory says something differently, while irony hides and suppresses something not saying what it really means, only seemingly stating it. Moreover, the stories of allegory and irony have recently (in the past fifty years) been closely (not at all surprisingly) connected with the critique of modernity and modernism as well as rationalism and formalism. Thus both concepts were transferred from literary criticism to the history of ideas and epistemology, then lent back to art history.

Postmodern allegory disrupts, subjectivizes, and relativizes space, culture, time, and history—thus managing to yield excitement in the cold and target-oriented world of late capitalism.¹ Thus it can be a kind of plunge headfirst into the past that is not at all an antiscientific and illogical move but rather a creative and innovative act.² Art history, therefore, reached a critique of modernity by way of formalism, while some of the social and cultural historians made their first steps in similarly ironical and allegorical directions. Taking his lead from Giambattista Vico, Hayden White, for instance, arrived at the conclusion that modern historiography is fundamentally ironical, since irony as a trope is really a metatrobe, based on the use and remodeling of the figurative and rhetorical dimension of language. In this sense, historians themselves relate to “readymade” historical fact and thought in an ironical and figurative manner.³ Thus history is always a kind of metahistory, that is, an ironic (and at the same time allegorical) version of history (and not merely the past “as it really was”).

In the USA White and his followers were more or less traveling on the same tracks as laid down by the European postmodern (epistemological) critique of modernity: the stakes involved the review, ideological analysis, disassembly and reassembly—in other words, the epistemological “relativizing”—of great narratives in Baltimore and New Haven as well as in Paris. From a Hungarian perspective, however, not only Jean-Francois Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, and Paul de Man indulged in picking apart things and putting them back together a little differently, but Miklós Erdély did so, too, under the auspices of the avant-garde, neo avant-garde, then later of new sensibility. He, among other things, wrote a seminal text on Gábor Roskó, who in his own way also did this job of fixing and remodeling, only in the medium of painting, at least in the germinal time of the 1980s.⁴ But Roskó did not do art history the kind of favor that Erdély did, who provided his most important works with excellent—albeit ironical—interpretations.

For me, the stories of Erdély and Roskó are woven together in a photo which shows them side by side preparing for Indigo group's exhibition *Painting*: the snapshot captures them while fastening plungers on a big glass plate. That is to say they are invoking—naturally

¹ Craig Owens, “The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism,” *October* 12 (Spring 1980): 67–86; (Summer 1980): 58–80.

² Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” *Selected Writings*. Vol. 4, 1938-1940 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

³ Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

⁴ Miklós Erdély, “Böröcz – Roskó,” *Böröcz – Roskó* (Budapest: Stúdió Galéria, 1985).

via Marcel Duchamp—the systematic critique of painting (*The Large Glass*) and its provocative repudiation (*Fountain*). Recently I have also learned that Roskó's *The Bridge* (1985) depicts the “architect” Erdély as part of an especially allegorical representation, which erects a somewhat ironical monument to the interdisciplinary student of science and letters. To be even more precise, it inserts Erdély's character into an allegory that is more of an enigma, as the viewer is not able to decrypt the message, decode the picture puzzle, since it is not unequivocal any more but left intentionally obscure. Thus *The Bridge* does not (and cannot) come together as an integral whole, but the montage of the Eiffel Tower, Christ, the Sphinx, and the tartan-trousered Erdély yields a rather entertaining medley, not only from an epistemological point of view, but also with regard to formalism and sense perception. And it is this sensuality, or rather sensualism, that frees Roskó's work and life-work from the ruthless and paradox law of Erdély's montage theory and allows the works to operate as a fusion of fiction and reality—in their own illusory quality.⁵ The different stories thrown together and reworked by Roskó do not cancel one another, so they guard the classical (what is more, mythic) conception of art, while at the same time not wanting to articulate clear-cut statements, messages, or commandments. They address us in a different manner, and in some cases they stay absolutely silent.

The Linguistic Turn

We are—at least apparently—still in America, as the forerunner of “the linguistic turn” was the philosopher Richard Rorty, every inch an American, who is, nonetheless, deeply rooted in the European metaphysical tradition.⁶ This might be the reason why he managed to pull the trick of reinterpreting pragmatism by way of hermeneutics, through which he was able to call attention not only to the relativity of knowledge but also to the fact that it is a linguistic construct, illustrating the opaque nature of language by examples that are perhaps less than explicit or narrowly understood (Nietzsche, Heidegger, Kundera).⁷ The context-dependent nature of knowledge and the figurative dimension and prefabricated structure of language lead to a democratic political mentality—rather pragmatically—in his case generating solidarity on the grounds of irony and self-reflection. Rorty thus pulled the skeptic and agnostic (*mise en abyme*) sting of deconstruction and managed to neutralize its hallucinogenic venom to a certain extent.

The very venom that is, of course, seen by deconstructionists as medicine (in Derrida's and Plato's term, *pharmakon*), which has its own antiauthoritarian politics (leading back to Socrates). This politics primarily manifests itself in questioning hierarchies and authority and denying ultimate, unappealable references (either physical or metaphysical). According to Paul de Man, irony not only conceals something by not showing what it really means but— even more maddeningly—emits a sense of denial and damage; more elegantly speaking, of negation and destruction, or, even more elegantly speaking, of a deconstructive attitude which, even if not doubting the universal truth content of human propositions, largely relativizes it.⁸ This, however, takes us further to another linguistic turn that is not really pragmatic but rather romantic.

⁵ The central concept of Erdély's montage theory is the extinguishment of meaning thesis, according to which, the artist combines and confronts different fragments of meaning in a way that they do not add up to a unified integral sense, but rather extinguish and cancel one another. Compare Miklós Erdély, “Montázsgeztus és effektus” [“The Gesture and Effect of Montage”], 1975, Erdély, *A filmről [On Film]* (Budapest: Balassi, 1995) 142-60.

⁶ Richard Rorty, ed., *The Linguistic Turn* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

⁷ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

⁸ Paul de Man, *The Concept of Irony* (Columbus: Ohio State University, 1977).

This kind of reading, the language-oriented viewpoint is probably not far from Roskó either: at least this is what might be inferred from his use of image and text. What is more, at one time texts became very important for Roskó, and we are justified to use the concepts of solidarity and skepticism to aid our interpretation. Even the title of the graphic series *9 x 9 ZOO* (2001) is ironical, as it does not simply display a zoo, but rather treats our everyday lives as such. To be more exact, animals act like humans at home, at the barbershop, or the pub. Not only do they act—wearing the elegant attire from another era that evokes period dramas—but foxes, bears, crocodiles, rabbits, and elephants philosophize, too, mostly contemplating matters of aesthetics and ethics. These stories do not qualify as allegories, however, as the figures do not symbolize abstract concepts. Yet the drawings are not mere caricatures of moralizing painterly instances either. In one graphic, for example, a fox is shaving a hare bigger than it is, while someone states, “using language just tears us further apart.” What is even more puzzling is that Roskó uses a rather wide array of languages—“vocabularies” in Rorty’s terminology—from today’s popular versions of ancient Gnostic philosophy—“I personally chose love”—to a similarly ancient version of skepticism which, however, appears modern: “I yearn to understand the world better. This is only a dream, things are undecipherable, we are witnesses and not the players.”

Simultaneously to the drawings, around the turn of the millennium Roskó added poignant texts to his paintings. The painterly collage, or rather, montage, of images and texts is naturally linked to the second renaissance of dada in postmodern painting, as well as the spirit of the even more politicized American appropriation art. Both were characterized by appropriation and recontextualization, and became intertwined with the apparently liberal politics of multiculturalism and hybridity as well as with a newer, disillusioned, and uncommitted epoch of irony. The America of the 1980s was copied in Hungary in the 1990s, spawning such hybrid art as *Sándor Rózsa is Arrested by the Wine Commando* (1999-2002), “starring” Frank Zappa (as Rózsa) and a Playboy bunny reminiscent of Cindy Crawford (as Rózsa’s sweetheart, presumably an undercover agent). Roskó presents a multiply ironic story in a billboard-like realist style, where actual reality (the struggle against counterfeit wine) is fused with the problematic of a fictive, imaginary national identity (Sándor Rózsa) and its eligibility for representation in the realm of international icons and allegories (beautiful, healthy woman; eccentric, creative artist). *Rex, Kurt Weill, Me and Foreign Affairs* (1999-2001) similarly but perhaps even more directly leads to matters of identity politics, where—rather ironically—only Rex’s figure can be read unequivocally, which should incidentally be painted a German shepherd and not a collie.

Pop culture and new narrativity in the literature and film of the 1980s can be interpreted as a new “linguistic” turn, which in fine art was interwoven with an earlier linguistic turn of analytic and not mythic nature. The range of linguistic reflection is, of course, extremely complex—in general, too, but especially so in the case of Roskó. While *Madonna vs. Lion King* (2002), painted with a neoexpressionist tint, passes for a simple joke, an entertaining game with different kinds and traditions of imagery, *I Wouldn’t Go that Far* (2003-2004) has an eerie, unsettling effect, perhaps also for the reason that it evokes the figure of the Sphinx and its symbolist discourse. All the more so, as Roskó stages his theme in a late 1960s war-movie environment, further emphasizing the process of ironic concealment and generation of meaning by way of *mise en abyme*. Even more enigmatic is *The Meeting of Descartes and Spinoza* (2005), which in Roskó’s “reading” materialized as a sculpture made for an exhibition in Leiden, picturing two winged, baseball-capped figures, in between whom a balance without a dial conjures up the philosophical problematic of measurement and substances. Along the same philosophical lines we have *Mr. Stephen Hawking* (2013), which, however, carries archaic and not the least modern connotations with its plastic language (African face, weird containers, golden glaze). Hawking himself, a pioneer of modern

cosmology, does not even appear in his physical self, as physiognomy and form generate different references. Metaphorically, however, the work depicts a motorized “idol,” a much worshipped (but at least deeply respected), high-tech golden calf. Thus the Great Mind forced into a wheelchair in its plastic reality and in its ironic rendition talks about a kind of hybridization which, in a biological and cognitive sense, could be best allegorized by the Nobel-winning English physician existing as cybernetic organism.

The Pictorial Turn

The term “pictorial turn,” focusing on the ontology and functionality of images, as well as on the ideological references of such, appeared only in the early 1990s, but it is evidently the brainchild of the late capitalist hunger for images and culture, which has haunted the working class at least since the time of television or even that of cinema.⁹ Yet many regard the 1980s as the era of new figurativity and new sensibility, when allegorizing, stylistic, and thematic eclecticism was back into fashion, what is more, up to date. Furthermore, the philosophy and art theory of the era bought into figurativity as well, although the majority of American postmodern painting was deemed as cheap kitsch by American academic criticism. Yet, parallel to this it wrote the “new” postmodern and allegorical theory of appropriation, fragmentation, and pictorial puzzles, which interpreted the artistic appropriation and mounting of texts and pictures of different origin as a critique of modern rationalism and modernist symbolism.

In the late 1970s Craig Owens and Benjamin Buchloh set off to create the critique of modernity, the avant garde, and modernism in the wake of Walter Benjamin’s peculiarly avant garde concept of allegory. Benjamin’s reinterpretation of allegory was, of course, a symptom or intellectual product of its age, reflecting the anticapitalist and Marxist aesthetician’s fondness for the philosophy as well as imagery and textuality of dada and surrealism. While Benjamin discovered the roots of irony and satire used by irrational dada by studying the underrated and horroristic popular German baroque Trauerspiel (tragic drama), Owens and Buchloh caught a glimpse of dada’s political aesthetics in Hans Haacke’s, Barbara Kruger’s, and Sherry Levine’s art. They went on to weave together this aesthetic formalism with the theories of Derrida, de Man, and deconstruction, which formalized not only aesthetics, but epistemology and the history of ideas, too, even if in an explicitly ironical way. Naturally, Hungarian painting would look strange on the American aesthetic and political palette that ranges from David Salle’s heroic (or, according to some observers, macho) and ironically playful (or, according to other observers, superficial and snobbish) pseudo-historical work to Martha Rossler’s dedicated and politicized feminism. If for no other reason, since Hungarian use of imagery and texts in the 1980s was informed by the American example (for instance, Robert Rauschenberg) at least to such an extent as to be a creative Hungarian interpretation and reworking of those (see, for example, the aleatoric demontage of Sándor Altorjai, who cited Erdély himself in the form of an allegory and inspired Roskó, too).

Rauschenberg, Altorjai, and Erdély, as references, also show that Roskó’s postmodern, surreal, pseudo-historical painting in the 1980s was not so much a simple “private mythology,” as a kind of metahistory: a reinstalling of history and mythology that is not the least independent of the current tendencies of politics and culture.¹⁰ Nonetheless, we may say

⁹ Compare W. J. T. Mitchell, *The Pictorial Turn* (Artforum 1992.3) 89-94. One of Mitchell’s definitive sources is Guy Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone, 1994), a chief inspiration behind post-Marxist aesthetics.

¹⁰ Previously Mélyi arrived at a similar conclusion, although he described Roskó’s art not as metahistory but rather as “private history.” Compare József Mélyi, *Középkorú önarckép* [Middle-aged Self Portrait], Katalin Izinger, ed., *Roskó Gábor 2004* (Szent István Király Múzeum, Székesfehérvár, 2004).

that Roskó's metahistory displays the disassembly and reassembly of history, as much rooted in fairy tales and adventure novels reiterating myths as in the postmodern, ironic strain of epistemology and philosophy. It is as if strange tales of the wild west or South American youth literature came to life in Roskó's early canvasses, reworked by Beckett and translated by Örkény. In one such picture, for instance, two 19th-century wild western figures and a Native American chief discuss the matter of a charmingly cute cat (*This One Has Stolen the Cat*, 1981), in another a white character from around the 18th century is doing another person in while the Central American native stands dumbfounded (*Death of a Missionary*, 1987-1999). It is as if both works have some kind of narrative, but there is really not any, as they do not directly illustrate anything but rather moralize in their absurd manner—at least absurd from the aspect of mores. This becomes even more apparent if we take a look at *Cake Ship* (1986) and *A Tough Protestant Life* (1986), as here the figures talk about different well-known political and religious conflicts in their imagistic, allegorical tongue. The former points to the cultures of colonialism and postcolonialism, where the demise of colonial rule failed to bring about an end to exploitation and orientalism. The latter, somewhat enigmatically, sets a scene for the English-Scottish historical conflict, even though the Phrygian cap refers to the French and the chocolate to Belgians in a rather satirical manner. Later, in Roskó's metahistory, an almost mythicized English imperialism appears in *The Irish Question* (1997), a final stage of which is represented by the ghastly queen figure in *The Queen in Old Cork* (2011). The exceedingly homely woman is lighting someone's cigarette, while hugging a lizard-tailed, Molotov cocktail-wielding cyclist, who is probably supposed to remind the viewer of the Irish War of Independence and the town of Cork, which rose to fame as a rebel town and which was visited by a sugary British monarch in 2011, 100 years after, in an attempt to mend the torn seam of the English-Irish brotherhood.

Individual phases and types of metahistory are presented by Roskó's first ceramic installation, *Minamoto Joritomo* (1989), which displays the armor of a well-known samurai from the 12th century (the first real shogun lord), in Roskó's rendition, of course, as well as *Osama bin Laden* (2001-2002), which, however, historicizes a 21st-century Afghan warlord's portrait in an expressly provocative manner. While the former work might be included in a kind of private history, or understood as the playful fusion of history and fiction, the latter is intentional metahistory, as it is a retelling of an infamous story from a different angle, since for the West the interception of bin Laden was a kind of adventure story (romance), where good finally conquered evil. Looking from the East, from the Muslim world, however, a personality of high regard, a hero comparable only to Persian or Babylonian emperors, died tragically. On Roskó's drinking fountain he also appears as a dignified, ancient figure boasting a braided beard, holding a huge skull—as *memento mori*—in his hand.

White Mythology

The ironical, metahistorical rewriting of history, however, also creates a kind of white magic, where there is a viewpoint—irony's—available which discloses the ideological and rhetorical dimensions of the stories. This postmodern white magic is not only a relativizing of language and knowledge, or the critique of strict positivistic science, but beyond a certain point it becomes a new mythology itself. It is perhaps not accidental that one of Mr. White's "masters," Northrop Frye, started off by studying the Bible and ultimately described literary history holistically and rhetorically, basically delineating four different narrative schemes: tragedy, comedy, romance, and satire.¹¹ White, however, in a provocative gesture, relocated

¹¹ The theory of metahistory owes a lot to Frye's and Vico's work. Compare Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957) and Giambattista Vico, *The New Science* (1725, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

these narrations to describe reality, that is, history. According to his tropology, Michelet, Ranke, Tocqueville, and Burckhardt wrote their own great historical narratives in the forms of tragedy, comedy, romance, and satire, respectively, by organizing the actions around a basic trope such as metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony. Discussing this White also argues, moreover, that facts themselves are almost always freely moldable in accordance with the historian's intentions. Yet the flipside of the antiauthoritarian coin shows that in this way the historian gains a position similar to which once gods, or at least demigods occupied.

Some time before White, Jacques Derrida also wrote his own white mythology (*La mythologie blanche*), which, taking Plato and Aristotle as points of departure, analyzed the role of metaphor in philosophy and the generation of knowledge. It was from reading an Anatole France novel that the French philosopher returned to Nietzsche's legendary statement according to which "truth is a mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, antropomorphisms . . . Truths are illusions of which one has forgotten that they are illusions; worn-out metaphors which are powerless to affect the senses; coins with their images effaced and now no longer of account as coins but merely metal."¹² The term "white mythology" itself was coined by France in his ironic novel *The Garden OF Epicurus* (1895) as a critique of metaphysics: one of the protagonists, Ariste, holds that metaphysics is none other but a reduced version of classical mythology masquerading as science, albeit it is really a kind of mythology that has lost its colors. Derrida adds to this the contention that metaphysics gone gray, bereft of color and reality, is at the same time the mythology of the white man, which ensures the primacy of white Anglo-Saxon ideology through a philosophical and epistemological system. Thus Derrida also questions what Edward Said later expounds systematically in his postcolonial critique: ideology's treacherous integration into language, everyday life, and, naturally, epistemology.¹³

The politics of mythology as metahistory multiply pervades Roskó's lifework, which could best be allegorized by *Minjan* (1993-2003). In the large-sized ceramic installation, Roskó seats ten biblical heroes around a table, but the religious community thus created (*minjan*) is not at all classical, not even historically accurate, as some of the figures take animal shapes. David is a fox, for instance, Abraham a bear, and Moses is a donkey, and to add to the strangeness, they all wear smart early modern attire. They create an expressly real Jewish religious community, where melancholy Samson, sitting on his lion, has a place and so does malignant-looking, regicidal Jeroboam. Beyond its sculptural reality this community is, of course, virtual, as the company is made up of partly fictional, partly real figures of different bygone ages, whose virtues and vices at the same time define the pillars of Jewish culture. This charming and less than charming rococoish porcelain representation may pose a number of questions regarding the present and past of this culture. When making the figures Roskó only partially obeys the conventions of the culture, as he also rewrites them, which is at least as much proof of artistic invention as that of personal cultural politics.

Whereas a sort of melancholy irony pervades *Minjan*, the painting *King Stephen Settles Jews on Csepel Island* (2002) obviously turns toward satire, and it is a distant relative of cartoons and caricatures. The story is evidently fictional and not independent of the current political situation and anti-Semitism in Hungary. Roskó formulates his response in a fictitious historical genre painting, as he perhaps thinks that in a culture nationalist to the core, the other and the alien can only be legitimized through national heroes. We may observe the same culture when looking at *Ulysses Converting to Jewish Faith* (2002), and it makes a big difference who the agent that delivers the gist of the story is: whether it is Hungarian

¹² Derrida's philosophical corner stone here is, naturally, Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense," Levy O., ed., *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche* (New York: Russell, 1964) 173-85. See Jacques Derrida, *White Mythology* (1972), trans. F. C. T. Moore, *New Literary History* 6.1 (Fall 1974) 5-74.

¹³ Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Penguin, 1978).

historiography from the Gestas to today's history books or James Joyce and Leopold Bloom, who are—as we know well—partly of Hungarian descent. As far as I am aware of it, the same cannot be said of Mr. Bloom's "original," Ulysses, who Roskó already incorporated in his work in the 1980s in relation to sirens. The historicity of his pseudo-biblical, or rather metabiblical, works has recently approximated the classical and Renaissance realm of allegorical bestiaries with *We Await You, Messiah* (2011), where two big cats and a miserable little dog are waiting for the Jewish savior, while one of the cats is presumably lapping up Christ's blood from an ornate baroque chalice.

Listen, My Friend (2012) points out another segment of the latest "messianist" bestiary with the small, modern, socialist trucks parading on the gilded frame and the ugly old devils filling in the middle. One of the latter (or its close relative) already haunted *Let's See What's up in the World* from 1989. I am reading this picture as an allegorical depiction of the change of regime with the video player, the soldier wolf holding a video cassette, and the central figure evoking the Great French Revolution, glaring at the viewer, while the forked tongued devil and the stern wolf—which also reminds me of the Russian bear a little—are watching the distant horizon. Compared to this delicate, fairy tale-like irony, the two demons in *Listen, My Friend* call to mind (old and current) satyrs, even if they are not doing anything special apart from mocking their own realm, the Catholic faith and its symbols. Still, if we regard this near-blasphemous allegory on the desecration of the cross less strictly, the tempting devils might be taken as a kind of portrayal of Vanitas, calling our attention to the fact that bad Christians, bad readers, or bad viewers, who take what is seen or heard at face value without any reflection—be they snails or pigs—are sooner or later destined to fall, at least in Roskó's artistic universe.